

Is the Catholic Faith fading? Not really.



Spain sees 'astonishing' jump in Mass attendances Signs of revival in a former bastion of Catholicism

Like Quebec, Ireland, or Boston, Spain has epitomized the fading of Catholic faith. In the twentieth century, religious practice in Spain fell sharply, especially as the country transitioned to democracy and resentment of the Church's support for Franco's dictatorship surfaced.

Recently, however, the downward trend has stopped and is recovering. According to Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), the proportion of Spaniards attending Mass has increased from 12.1 to 15 percent between 2011 and 2012. In absolute terms, the number of Spanish Catholics attending Mass weekly grew by an astonishing further 23 percent between 2012 and 2013, according to CIS. Meanwhile, between 2007 and 2013 the number of Spaniards contributing part of their taxes to the Church rose from eight to nine million.

Not only are Spaniards attending Mass more frequently, but also youths are rediscovering the priesthood and religious life. In 2013–2014, the number of Spanish diocesan seminarians increased for a third consecutive year to 1321, a steady growth from 1227 in 2010–2011. Active female religious orders are also vibrant—each year, about 400 Spanish girls become non-cloistered sisters, a slowly increasing number.

The number of women at the Poor Clares Convent of the Ascension in Lerma has surged from 28 in 1994 to 134 in 2009. One of the Lerma nuns, Sister Verónica, created her own community, Jesu Communio. The Vatican approved the rapidly growing order, known as the “sisters in jeans” because they wear denim habits, in 2010. Immigration cannot explain this growth in monastic and priestly vocations.

Today, young Spaniards are leaving the country for the more prosperous parts of Latin America (especially Chile) and for Germany and Britain. Considering Spain's massive youth emigration and the fact that the country has one of Europe's lowest birth rates, Spain's youth population is shrinking, so this vocations rebound is more impressive. Perhaps no one puts a more attractive face on Spain's return to Catholicism than Olalla Oliveros.

Last month, the 36-year-old Spanish model stunned Spanish society by becoming a nun of the semi-cloistered Order of Saint Michael. Perhaps Oliveros did this out of frustration? On the contrary, she was at the height of her career and was recently offered a lead role in a big-budget film. Oliveros experienced a conversion several years back and made her decision after much thought.

Some would dismiss these recent developments as resulting from the economic crisis. Currently, unemployment in Spain is almost 27 percent; in the European Union, only Greece suffers from a worse jobless rate. Spain plunged into recession in 2008, with anemic GDP growth in recent quarters. Perhaps Spaniards are rediscovering the pews and seminaries because economic hardship is leading them to look for a last resort in religion?

There are several reasons why this is not the case. First, economic hardship is nothing new to Spain. In the early 1990s, Spain also suffered from severe recession and unemployment reached 23 percent in 1993, nearly the current rate. Yet throughout the 1990s rates of religious observance and vocations to the priesthood and religious life declined. A more dramatic example is the Great Depression, the worst recession in Europe in a century.

The 1930s did not revive Spanish religiosity. On the contrary, anticlericalism then arguably reached its climax in Spain's history. In 1931, Prime Minister Manuel Azaña declared that "Spain has ceased to be Catholic" and purged Spanish public life of anything Christian. Meanwhile, during the 1936–1939 Spanish Civil War anticlerical, communist-sympathizing Republicans murdered 7,000 priests, nuns, and seminarians with extreme brutality.

In his 1938 *Homage to Catalonia* George Orwell was astonished by how quickly Catalonian society was discarding its Catholic identity. Furthermore, Spain is not only experiencing a religious revival of its society, but its public sphere is also turning away from the moral relativism of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's government (2004–2011).

In 2005, Zapatero legalized same-sex "marriage" and the adoption of children by homosexual couples. In 2010 Zapatero's government legalized abortion on demand. Also, Zapatero made "express divorce" legal, ended mandatory religious education in schools and removed crucifixes from public buildings.

However, today's government of Mariano Rajoy is challenging Zapatero's revolution. Currently, it is pushing a bill banning abortion except when the pregnancy results from rape or threatens the mother's health or life. The bill would make Spanish legislation as pro-life as it has been since 1985. Spanish elites feel that Zapatero went too far in de-Christianization. Ireland, too, has also suffered economically.

However, Irish Catholicism remains in the doldrums since the economic collapse; no trends similar to the Spanish ones can be observed there. The number of Irish youths entering seminary remains depressingly low; many Irish parishes are closing; popular and political pressure to embrace same-sex "marriage" and abortion are mounting; Mass attendance in Dublin is fast approaching the single digits with no end in sight. Ireland demonstrates that economic depression does not necessarily cause religious revival.

What, then, accounts for this surprising turnaround in the state of Spanish Catholicism? Perhaps it can

be partially attributed to Pope Benedict XVI, sometimes criticized by some for excessively focusing on the re-evangelization of Western societies, being a Don Quixote trying to resurrect Christendom where it is obviously dead. Yet Spain mattered to Benedict. He visited the country three times, attracting some of the largest crowds of his pontificate. Spain's slight retreat from secularization can't simply be chalked up to economic difficulties. Something else is at play, whether a response to Benedict's summoning of Europe to return to its roots, a rediscovery of the beauty of religious life, weariness with Zapatero's secularist aggression, or something else entirely.

For some time, many had predicted that Spanish Catholicism would share the fate of the woolly mammoth and that Gothic churches in would be turned into pizzerias and discotheques. However, Spanish Catholicism is regaining a vibrancy it has not seen in decades. When Pope Francis visits Spain next year, he will find a struggling local Church, but one where Catholic culture is being visibly reborn. Full Story: [Is Spain regaining its faith?](#)

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